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FINNISH POETRY—NATURE'S MIRROR

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OUT of the mêlée of the world's masses of struggling humanity striving during the past eight years to attain "a place in the sun," there has been born a new republic—the Republic of Finland. The birth of this republic was the signal for a glorious Finnish celebration, for it marked the termination of century-old efforts to throw off the yoke of a Russian autocracy. The Finnish declaration of independence attracted the entire world. The great powers affixed their stamp of approval and turned to other world affairs perhaps of greater significance. However, for the Finn the event was notable. He may now and for generations to come, with justifiable pride, tell to his children the story of the "Declaration of Independence" of December 6, 1917, and of the Constitutional law of June 14, 1919, whereby Finland officially declared herself a member of the world family of republics.

The Finns are a unique people. The development of their nationalistic spirit is likewise unique. This spirit was crystallized by the conversion of their folk-song into a national epic—the *Kalevala*, an epic ranking in quality and originality with the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and the *Nibelunge*. The Finns are an imaginative folk, a characteristic they owe to their oriental ancestry. There is little doubt that the first settlers in Finland migrated from central Asia, probably from the region of the Altai mountains. They brought with them a high regard for the controlling influences of the laws of nature and an unequalled devotion to the out-of-doors. They deify the elements of nature, and list among their gods, the God of Waters, God of Forests, God of Fire, God of Breezes and numerous others. Their mythology is essentially a nature worship. In the *Kalevala* it finds its best expression.

For the composition of the folk-songs into epic form, the Finns are indebted to Elias Lönnrot, first a physician and later a professor of the Finnish language. He appreciated the beauty, the charm and the rare culture expressed by the Finnish folk-songs and resolved that they should be preserved to posterity. These verses, sung through the ages, had never been recorded, so Lönnrot determined to collect them. He traveled to the remotest parts of

Finland where modernisms had not yet penetrated and as he listened hour after hour to the singing of the peasantry, faithfully recorded each canto. Most of the songs were collected in the remote northern portions of the province of East Karelia. Returning home with his note-books bulging with invaluable records, Lönnrot knitted the verses into a homogeneous whole of some 27,000 lines, and in 1835 gave to the world the results of his years of untiring efforts—the *Kalevala*.

The *Kalevala* brought home to the Finns the realization of a common language. For the first time did they appreciate the possession of a language meriting the same consideration as Russian, German, Swedish or other recognized national tongues. They further saw the basis for a sympathetic bond among all the Finns and so, almost as soon as Lönnrot's magnificent work made its appearance, it was hailed as the epic of the Finnish people. The *Kalevala* marked the virtual beginning of an intensive spirit of nationalism throughout Finland.

While all writers do not credit the *Kalevala* as a true epic, nor wholly discredit it as such, nevertheless they regard the production as extraordinary and certainly approaching closely to an epic. In any event, be it an epic or nearly so, there is agreement as to the uniqueness in its style, in the beauty of its conceptions and in its dramatic presentation of the struggle for existence among a people never known to flinch under the stress of nature's most discouraging environment.

Before detailing the content of the *Kalevala*, it is of interest to note the peasant's manner of singing the runes. The singers seat themselves upon low benches or stools, and facing each other with outstretched arms, take hold hands; then, as they sway their bodies to and fro in see-saw fashion, first one sings a song and then the other. The singing and see-sawing continue until one or the other runs out of verses. Sometimes others in the party take the places of those who have just finished and either repeat verses or begin a new series constituting a new rune. The meter is unrhymed. It is like that in Longfellow's "*Song of Hiawatha*." In fact, Longfellow was so impressed with the *Kalevala* that he admittedly patterned his song after it and it is said even borrowed some of the characters and incidents. The singing is accompanied by the playing of the *kantele*, an instrument similar to the dulcimer. The music itself is in a minor key and as it is sung resembles more nearly a chant than a melodious air.

The *Kalevala*, composed as it is of the folk-songs of a people largely if not wholly dependent upon their own ingenuity for the gaining of a livelihood, is really the story of the struggle of the

Finn to overcome the titanic handicaps set against him by nature. His "land of a thousand lakes" is a land of *thousands* of lakes, a land of vast swamps with only here and there a diminutive area suitable for cultivation. The lowland depressions invite premature frosts which often destroy in a night crops representing the hard labor of many months. No surplus of foods to be consumed during periods of scarcity can be accumulated where frost is master. Not only are products of the soil scant, but raw materials for manufactures are limited. The hardy forests for lumber and pulp and the numerous rapids for power send a ray of hope down the Finn's uncertain pathway toward success. Yet in the face of these limitations the Finn has plodded on patiently and uncomplainingly until to-day he has attained a place among the peoples of the earth which many may well envy.

The Finnish farmer is constantly threatened by frost. He knows not when or where it will fall next. A robber-band could hardly worry him more, for there would be some hope of resistance or escape, but the frost is not to be fought nor does it discriminate as to its prey. No wonder, then, that in the national epic Frost is personified and its destructive propensities narrated. In Rune 30 of the Kalevala, Frost interrupts the progress of Lemminkainen, one of the four heroes of the story, who proposes an attack against Pohjola, the North Country. (This region is now represented by Lapland.) Here he had previously gone upon an unsuccessful venture to woo the daughter of Louhi, Mistress of Pohjola. Lemminkainen remonstrated with Frost in no uncertain terms and describes him as follows:

. . . Evil-born and evil-nurtured,
Grew to be an evil genius,
Evil was the mind and spirit,
And the infant still was nameless,
Till the name of Frost was given
To the progeny of evil.

Then the young lad lived in hedges,
Dwelt among the weeds and willows,
Lived in springs in days of summer,
On the borders of the marshes,
Tore the lindens in the winter,
Stormed among the glens and forests,
Raged among the sacred birch-trees,
Rattled in the alder branches,
Froze the trees, the shoots, the grasses,
Evened all the plains and prairies,
Ate the leaves within the woodland,
Made the stalks drop down their blossoms,
Peeled the bark on weeds and willows.

The heavenly bodies as well as the elements of the earth are humanized and deified. They are removed and replaced and caused to perform as circumstances may dictate, with a facility such as characterizes the most magnificent flights of the imagination. Louhi, Mistress of Pohjola, hides the Sun and Moon when the heroes Ilmarinen, Wainamoinen and Lemminkainen organize an expedition against her in order to rob her of the Sampo—"the talisman of success." Her resistance is finally overcome and she is forced to restore the Sun and Moon. The restoration (in Rune 49) is accomplished and Wainamoinen, Son of the Air and of the Virgin of the Atmosphere, a minstrel of magic power, observes the return of these heavenly bodies and recites as follows:

Greetings to thee, Sun of fortune,
 Greetings to thee, Moon of good-luck,
 Welcome sunshine, welcome moonlight,
 Golden is the dawn of morning!
 Free art thou, O Sun of silver,
 Free again, O Moon beloved,
 As the sacred cuckoo's singing,
 As the ring-dove's liquid cooings.

Rise, thou silver Sun, each morning,
 Source of light and life hereafter,
 Bring us, daily, joyful greetings,
 Fill our homes with peace and plenty,
 That our sowing, fishing, hunting,
 May be prospered by thy coming.
 Travel on thy daily journey,
 Let the Moon be ever with thee;
 End thy journeyings in slumber;
 Rest at evening in the ocean,
 Glide along thy way rejoicing,
 When thy daily cares have ended,
 To the good of all thy people,
 To the pleasure of Wainola,
 To the joy of Kalevala!

A cheerful aspect of the Finnish environment is presented in the Farewell song (in Rune 24) of the daughter of Pohjola who has become bride of the smith and craftsman Ilmarinen. This song paints a landscape to whose attractiveness those can well attest who have tramped across Finland's fens or through her forests.

Send to all my farewell greetings,
 To the fields, and groves, and berries;
 Greet the meadows with their daisies,
 Greet the borders with their fences,
 Greet the lakelets with their islands,
 Greet the streams with trout disporting,
 Greet the hills with stately pine trees,
 And the valleys with their birches.

Fare ye well, ye streams and lakelets,
 Fertile fields and shores of ocean,
 All ye aspens on the mountains,
 All ye lindens of the valleys,
 All ye beautiful stone lindens,
 All ye shade trees by the cottage,
 All ye junipers and willows,
 All ye shrubs with berries laden,
 Waving grass and fields of barley,
 Arms of elms, and oaks and alders,
 Fare ye well, dear scenes of childhood,
 Happiness of days departed.

Ilmarinen returns (in Rune 25) to Wainola with his Pohjola bride, to receive an heroic welcome at the hands of Lakko, hostess of Wainola. Lakko recounts in great detail the numerous comforts awaiting the bride and concludes with a few effective words descriptive of the village setting. This description characterizes equally well a typical Finnish farm location of the present day.

Thou hast here a lovely village,
 Finest spot in all of Northland,
 In the lowlands sweet the verdure,
 In the uplands, fields of beauty,
 With the lake-shore near the hamlet,
 Near thy home the running water,
 Where the goslings swim and frolic,
 Water-birds disport in numbers.

The Finn's favorite trees are the gracefully clustered white-trunked birch, the stately symmetrical towering evergreen and the cheerful red-berried mountain ash. The birch is the most economic tree, for in addition to fuel it supplies numerous utensils. Wainamoinen (in Rune 44) wandering across the field and through the forests seeking his lost kantele, comes upon a weeping birch. He inquires into all this sadness and the tree responds as follows:

. . . I, alas! a helpless birch tree,
 Dread the changing of the seasons,
 I must give my bark to others,
 Lose my leaves and silken tassels.
 Often come the Suomi children,
 Peel my bark and drink my life-blood;
 Wicked shepherds in the summer,
 Come and steal my belt of silver,
 Of my bark make berry baskets,
 Dishes make, and cups for drinking.
 Oftentimes the Northland maidens
 Cut my tender limbs for birch brooms,
 Bind my twigs and silver tassels
 Into brooms to sweep their cabins;
 Often have the Northland heroes

Chopped me into chips for burning;
 Three times in the summer season,
 In the pleasant days of springtime,
 Foresters have ground their axes
 On my silver trunk and branches,
 Robbed me of my life for ages.

Thus the valued birch acquires personality and through the words of the folk-song permanent expression is given to the Finn's appreciation of its services.

No discussion of Finnish life could possibly be considered complete without reference to the bath. The Finn swears by the bath. It is an institution of no mean value, for it not only helps him preserve his health but, to his mind, serves also as a cure for all ills. The bathhouse is one of the first of the numerous structures to be erected upon a Finnish farm site. It is a small frame shack containing a glacial-boulder fire-place. The fire-place projects well into the room and is without a chimney. A hole in the roof of the building permits the smoke to escape, or sometimes the cracks between the timbers are relied upon as substitutes for the chimney.

In the preparation of the bath, the stones of the fire-place are first heated to a high temperature. Then the fire is put out and cold water is thrown upon the stones. Great clouds of condensed steam fill the room. Around the walls of the room are shelf-like platforms upon which the bathers lie. As the steam stimulates the blood circulation, the bather beats himself with a bundle of birch or aspen twigs. After some ten or twenty minutes immersion in the steam, he enters a small adjoining room and there throws cold water upon himself. The cold "shower" is sometimes applied out-of-doors instead of in a room. He then retires to his house to dress. In winter it is not unknown for a bather to roll in the snow immediately after the bath. The shock of course is great, but with training from childhood the Finn withstands the ordeal and develops tremendous physical endurance.

The Finn's faith in the bath is unbounded and to find it immortalized in his national epic is rightly to be expected. In the "Birth of the Nine Diseases," (Rune 45), there follows an interesting description of the bath and a prayer that its curative qualities may endure:

Wainamoinen heats the bathroom,
 Heats the blocks of healing sandstone,
 With the magic wood of Northland,
 Gathered by the sacred river;
 Water brings in covered buckets
 From the cataract and whirlpool;
 Brooms he brings enwrapped with ermine,
 Well the bath the healer cleanses,

Softens well the brooms of birch-wood;
Then a honey-heat he wakens
Fills the room with healing vapors,
From the virtue of the pebbles
Glowing in the heat of magic,
Thus he speaks in supplication:
"Come, O Ukko, to my rescue,
God of Mercy, lend thy presence,
Give these vapor baths new virtues,
Grant to them the powers of healing . . ."

Reference has been made to the minor key in which these runes are sung. Finnish music is impressive because so full of character. Its melodies reveal nature's severity, yet they also reflect her forbearance. Life is never so hard but that it has its compensating days. So the minor key reflects at times a somewhat sombre atmosphere and a certain degree of sadness, yet the absence of heavy accents helps to create a feeling of hopefulness and high spirit. One easily recognizes the rushing streams with alternating rapids and reaches, or the clear sparkling glacial waters playing in the brilliant northern sunshine. Nature seems to direct in every song.

The Finn, stolid and phlegmatic at times, but persevering and tenacious, possessed of remarkable physical endurance and a stout heart, has given his brain cells opportunity for growth. His countrymen show the highest percentage of literacy among the nations. He loves to read. In his long hours of solitude he digests his readings and allows his imagination full freedom to build upon the ideas absorbed. Thus the Finn has evolved a vivid imagination which has contributed to the development of literature of exceptional merit. His poetry, including both folk-songs and modern works, having been conceived amid the influences of nature, show her unmistakable impress. The reflection of the environment is perfect, and in the Kalevala, especially, the character of Finnish life is accurately and strikingly imaged.